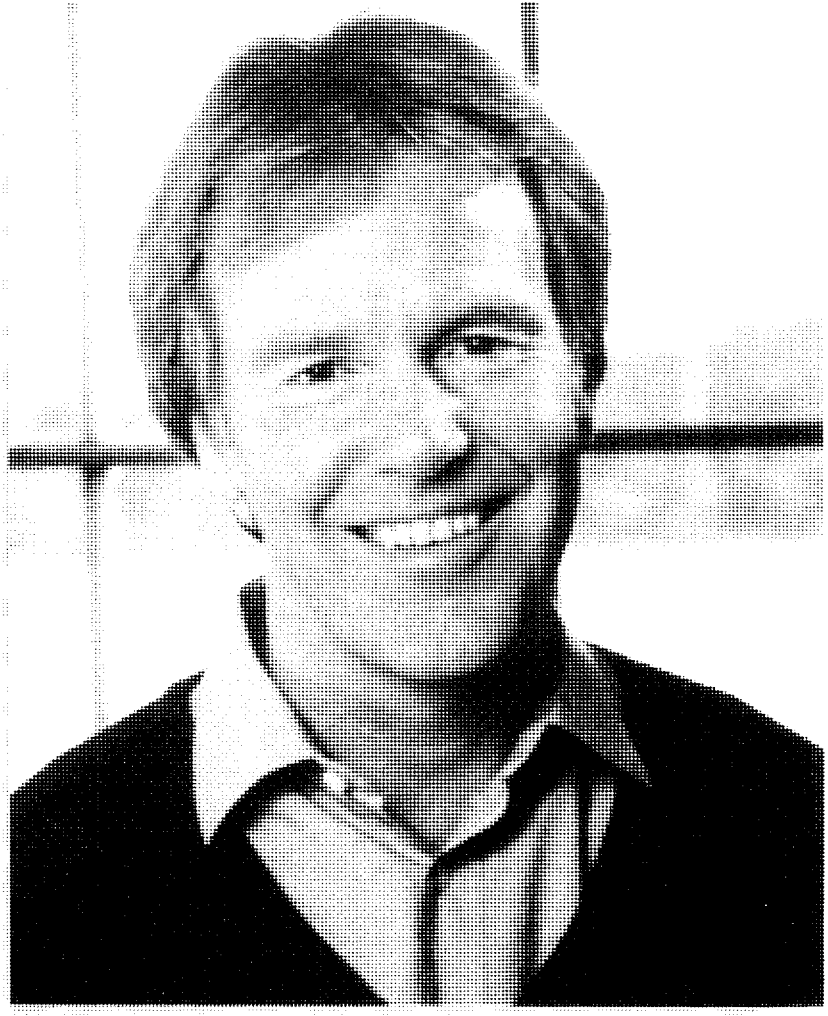
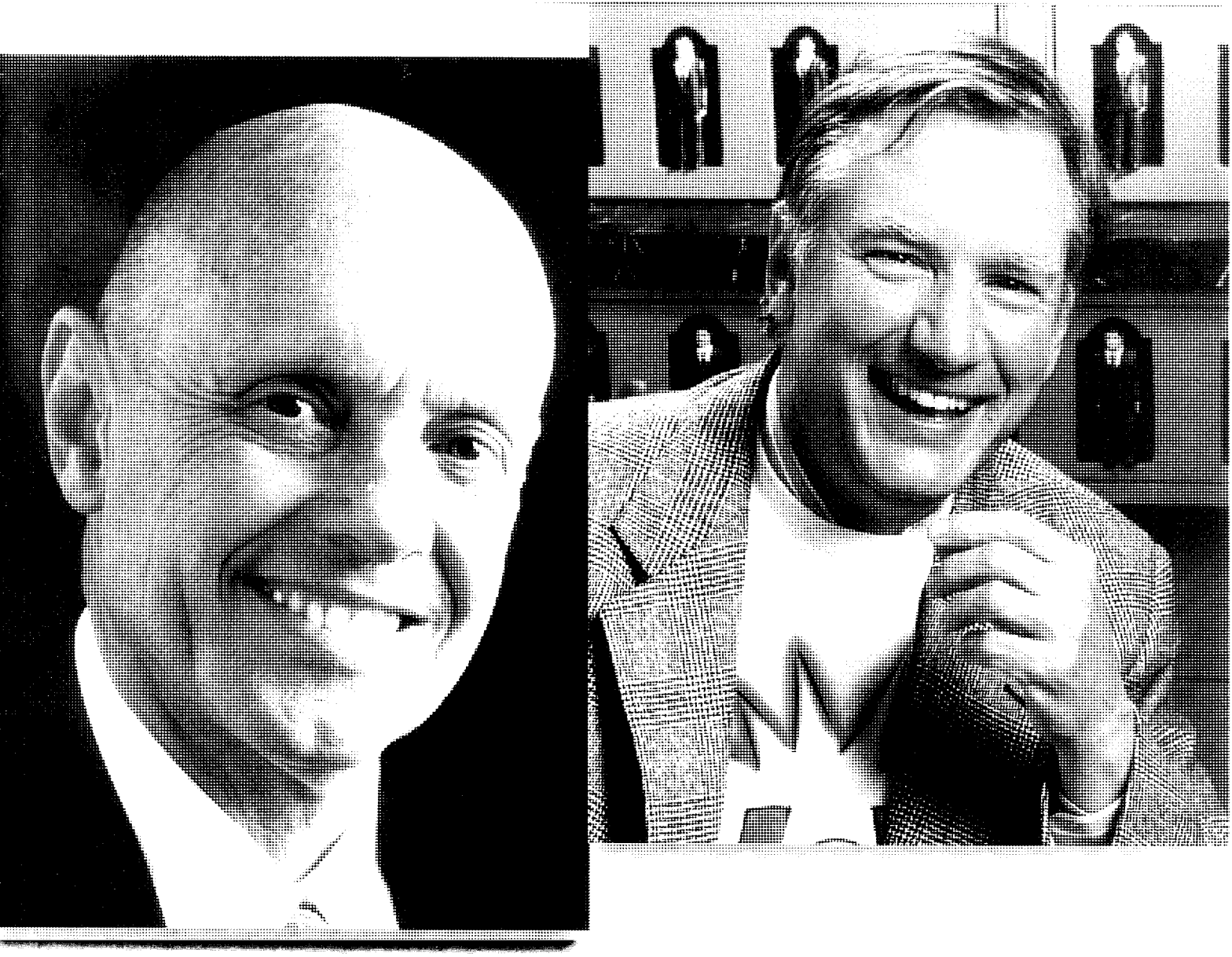
Senge, Covey, *and* Peters *on* Leadership Lessons



This trio of experts on organizational behavior has a lot to say about engaging people in change. They'd like you to apply what's relevant to you and pass it along.

By Ann I. Mahoney, CAE



Leaders, say Senge, Covey, and Peters, are distinguished by their deep understanding of how people can work together effectively.

An afternoon spent in the presence of Peter Senge, Stephen Covey, and Tom Peters is worth sharing. Senge is the author of *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization,* the director of the Center for Organizational Learning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management, and a founding partner of Innovation Associates, Inc. Covey is the author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, Principle-Centered Leadership,* and *First Things First,* and he is the founder and chairman of Covey Leadership Center. Peters has authored numerous best-selling management books, including *The Pursuit of WOW!: Every Person's Guide to Topsy-Turvy Times, Thriving on Chaos,* and *A Passion for Excellence* (with Nancy Austin), and he founded and chairs three training and communication companies.

In this instance, I "met" these three management gurus via closed-circuit television—a cozy gathering of Senge, Covey, Peters, and some 221,000 viewers worldwide. (And it was the first time these men had met each other. Interesting that it took technology to bring them together face to face.)

The strength of their delivery styles and the always thoughtful, often thought-provoking content of their messages prevailed over some minor technical difficulties of this technology-enabled conference. By the way, their delivery styles are refreshingly dissimilar. Senge comes off as introspec-

tive and carefully probing, Covey as deliberate and expostulative, Peters as slightly crazed in a fun way. "Worldwide Lessons in Leadership Series" is a series of leadership conferences telecast around the world; I attended the one hosted in Washington, D.C., by the James Madison University Center for Professional Development in cooperation with *Fortune* magazine.

Covey, Senge, and Peters contributed different perspectives to a discussion about leadership in the context of "making your team unstoppable." According to these management experts, for the foreseeable future, group results will be what counts. Where, then, does the leader fit in? Successful leaders—Covey, Senge, and Peters would argue—are distinguished by their deep understanding of how people can work together effectively.

That's why I thought you would be interested in the comments of these observers of organizations. Whether in your role as a volunteer leader eager to help your association achieve its goals or in your role as chief executive officer of your own organization, the leadership responsibilities and challenges are comparable. Perhaps the following reflections will clarify some of your leadership issues, shake some of your assumptions, and invigorate some of your thinking.

Peter Senge on interdependencies

Why do the formal systems in organizations keep dominating the informal systems? That question, says Senge, is what's generating so much current interest in teams. Senge defines teams as groups of people who need one another to take action. Teams are not a management fad, Senge emphasizes; teamwork is how people in organizations have always gotten work done, but teams are part of the informal system, not the formal system.

We accomplish our work, explains Senge, in nesting kinds of teams. He's referring to the webs of interdependency that are so extensive we almost don't see them. And Americans in particular, raised on the ethic of individualism and entrepreneurial spirit, are most blind to the interdependencies.

Leadership on teams is situational—from a team driven by a single leader to a fluid, self-directed team, such as a jazz ensemble, and anything in between. Teams are where most knowledge is created. (Senge defines *knowledge* as having the capacity for effective action, which is how most learning occurs.) People in organizations are learning all the time, organizations aren't.

Senge reminds us that learning always starts with questions. And it's very contextual, so practice has to take place in a setting very like the real setting. It's no wonder, asserts Senge, that so little learning takes place in business—where there are few "practice fields."

But the single biggest impediment to learning is that there's not time to be reflective. Practice creates the setting and allocation of time to reflect among people who have the power to act (i.e., among team members).

This is where Senge distinguishes between a problem-solving approach and a learning approach: As managers, we're addicted to problem solving, which explains why problems keep getting fixed over and over. In a learning approach, you think about your thinking. You become aware of the extraordinary interdependence of problems. And you get people to question their assumptions. Senge believes that learning through self-discovery is what makes deep changes actually possible.

Stephen Covey on synergy

Relationships are what are really important in achieving anything, asserts Covey. And what prevents relationships from being successful are an absence of trust among and toward senior management and poor communication. When levels of trust are high, communication is effortless; but when trust is low, communication is costly—and nothing you do to try to communicate works.

Trust is the condition that enables synergy to take place. Synergy happens when something new is being created in relationships among individuals. Covey advises that you develop trust through trustworthiness—for instance, always showing "loyalty to the absent," that is, talking about people as if they were present.

Certain habits, suggests Covey, are themselves synergistic. First, always think in terms of win–win—that is, with mutual respect comes mutual benefit. Second, always seek first to understand the other before trying to be understood. This involves practicing what Covey calls "emphatic listening." The ground rule of emphatic listening is that you can't make your point until you can restate the other person's point to his or her satisfaction. The more you understand the other person's frame of reference, the more creative you become and the more synergy you create. Synergism and the process of understanding others reveal that the strength of a decision or action actually lies in the differences between us.

Covey's advice to leaders is to get people genuinely involved by creating an atmosphere of trust and open communication. In such an atmosphere, people will help you change the systems that prevent synergy. It all comes back, too, to how important relationships are.

Tom Peters on "the seven beyonds"

In a world in which three or four forces (computers, the economy, etc.) are changing everything we do, how do you "win"? Peters thinks it's not in total quality management or in reengineering or in downsizing, but rather in out-innovating the competition, a thought he attributes to James Moore (president, GeoPartners Research Inc., Cambridge, Massa-

chusetts). Which brings Peters to his "beyonds."

Beyond change. What is required, argues Peters, is not only a little tweak, not only making things a little bit better today than yesterday, but "permanent revolution." He quotes Nicholas Negroponte (founder of MIT Media Lab, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge) in saying that "incrementalism is innovation's worst enemy."

Beyond decentralization. To Kevin Kelly (editor of *Wired* magazine) Peters attributes the quote, "It's easier to kill an organization than to change it." Peters recommends disorganization to unleash the imagination, and even goes so far as to proffer that in 1996 the CEO as steward is a destroyer, not a conserver.

Beyond empowerment. Here Peters refers to the observation of Gary Hamel (visiting professor of strategy and international management at the London Business School and chairman of Strategos, Menlo Park, California) that the object is not to get employees to support change; the object is to give people responsibility for engendering change. Peters sees an emerging diamond-shaped organizational model, where you turn every job into a business. At the top of the diamond are managers and at the bottom are clerks, and the vast majority in the middle are largely autonomous and independent.

Peters recommends turning everything into project work. Or in other words, convert your department into a professional service firm, transforming it into an independent profit-oriented, customer-service-oriented, project-oriented organization. And position client members on all project teams.

Beyond loyalty to the firm. It's a new work order, says Peters. We each have to learn to think and act like independent contractors. Here Peters even dares to comment that while he did see humor in Scott Adams's "Dilbert" comic strip, he had a bone to pick with an underlying premise of the comic strip—the powerlessness of employees. Powerlessness, Peters contends, is a state of mind; if you think you're powerless, you are. In the new world order, if you can't say how you've made your organization a better place, you're out.

Beyond the learning organization. It's time now to create the curious organization, which begins with a curious you. Peters says we're headed to an age of "creation intensification," and renewal is every person's job number 1. Corporate vitality depends on commitment to personal renewal throughout the organization. As Peters puts it, get obsessed about renewal or get out. ►

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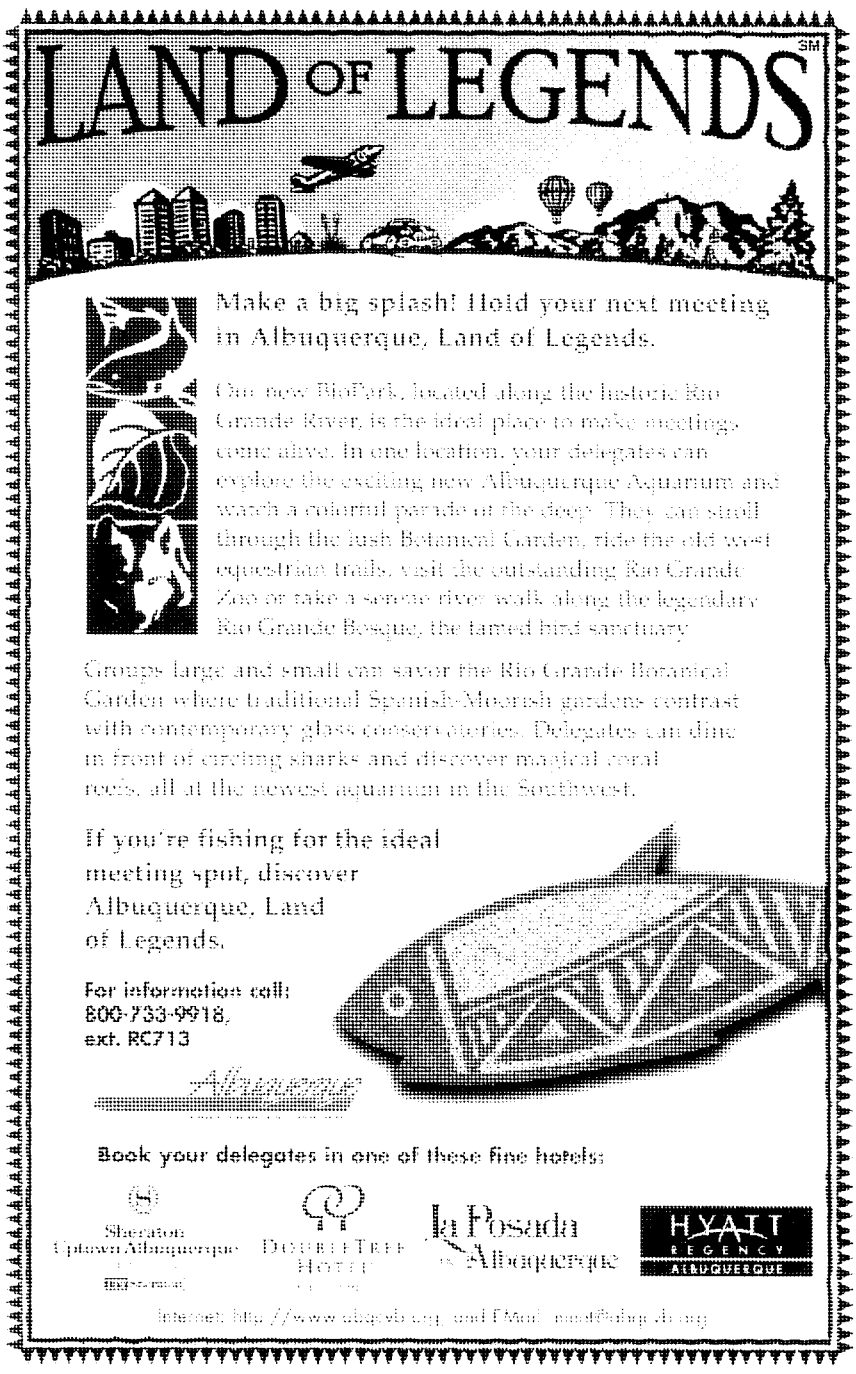
Beyond TQM. With American organizations having got serious about total quality management during the past 15 years, it's credible, but it's also everywhere—so it's no longer enough. Your work has to have what Peters calls WOW! power. You have to create a service and loyalty revolution. Loyalty, Peters explains, comes from achieving quality (does it work?), excitement (is it fun?), and customer service. Customer service seems like such an easy thing to copy that nobody tries. Peters recommends demolishing your customer service department and empowering your customers by creating transparent structures that are totally focused on customers; hiring, rewarding, and promoting customer-service-obsessed people; and adopting a world view that can't imagine doing things any other way.

Beyond change. Whatever made you successful in the past, warns Peters, won't work in the future. That's why we're moving toward perpetual revolution. Peters challenges you to "live your lives as energetically, creatively, and loudly as these times demand."



Life's two secrets

After the presenters' formal remarks, Senge, Covey, and Peters responded to audience questions submitted via electronic mail from around the globe. One question concerned how to distinguish individual performance on teams. The three experts suggested setting standards and using self-evaluation. They also pointed out that—just as is the case in athletics and the performing arts—it's the *combination* of individual and team performance that needs to be measured.

On the issue of balancing work and professional lives, Covey recommended developing your own personal mission statement. Ask yourself what the principles are that you want to live by, what you feel right about. For example, Covey offered that leadership is more important than management of time; effectiveness more important than efficiency; and people more important than things. He suggests that you choose what to accomplish physically, socially, spiritually, and intellectually, and then decide what's important to change right now.

Answering the question of how to create trust, Covey responded that you do it by seeking understanding of the other person's point of view. Peters' response to the question was that you need to "take the time to be human." In doing so, you might discover what he discovered: Life's secrets are in the little stuff—thank-you notes and flowers.

Ann I. Mahoney, CAE, is editor of ASSOCIATION MANAGEMENT *and attended the first "Worldwide Lessons in Leadership Series" September 12, 1996, in Washington, D.C.*